

The Phantasmatic Mind and the Superstitious Parts of the Tattooed Body

Maria Do Rosário Dias*, Ana Ferreira, Maria Calejo Pires, Inês Nunes and Maria do Rosário Carvalho

Egas Moniz - Cooperativa de Ensino Superior, Portugal

***Corresponding Author:** Maria Do Rosário Dias, Centro de Investigação Multidisciplinar em Psicologia da Saúde Egas Moniz, Campus Universitário, Quinta da Granja, Monte de Caparica, Caparica, Portugal.

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Abstract

Tattoos have presently become works of art and body accessories, serving as anchors that help to solidify a sense of Self. The present exploratory and qualitative study aimed at understanding the mental representation of the skin in tattooed individuals and the role that tattoos play as a vehicle for the projected identity of the Self. The studied sample consisted of 387 individuals from both genders (146 males and 241 females), aged 16 to 72 years with exposed tattoos, who were invited to produce two self-portraits and a written answer on whether they had experienced any form of discrimination due to their tattooed body. We then proceeded to the content analysis of the 774 collected pictorial drawings, using a grid featuring analytical categories purposely conceived for this study. The results revealed that the self-portraits drawn before the subjects were tattooed showed less body investment than those drawn afterwards. However, the mental representation of the self-portraits drawn after the subjects were tattooed showed a fragmented idea of the body - only the body part that was tattooed was pictorially represented. Additionally, they were associated to a state of happiness (e.g. smile, movement, flexibility, freedom) and to a personal valorization.

Keywords: Tattoos; Mental Representation; Body Image; Identity; Body Art

Introduction

The skin reflects each personal story through each line, wrinkle, beauty spot, scar, shape and color [1,2]. Tattoos are no longer exclusively associated with delinquency or a social stigma, on the contrary, they have begun to acquire other meanings. In fact, it is becoming more frequent to see tattooed individuals from different social backgrounds. In addition, the new methods of conceiving the body and the skin as a construction masterpiece are increasingly sought after by new generations and becoming an aesthetic option. Hence, tattoos have become works of art and body accessories, serving as anchors that help to solidify a sense of Self, by narrating an individual's conception of his identity [3]. The body - particularly the skin - can be seen as a symbolic media used both in the construction of the identity and in the transmission of a message. That is, the individual uses his body, as if it were a possession, to communicate who he is [4] and as a bodily expression of uniqueness [5,6]. The present exploratory and qualitative study aims at understanding the mental representation of the skin in tattooed individuals and the role that tattoos play as a vehicle for the projected identity of the Self, through the drawing technique. A person's perception on their body image is a key feature in understanding the subjective representations of the body [2,7-9]. Drawings of the human figure have been one of the most popular instruments in gaining access to individuals' mental representation on the body image (imago) and consequently onto the workings of deeply unconscious and cognitive processes [10-13].

Materials and Methods

A sample of convenience used to collect the data was composed by 387 individuals from both genders (146 males and 241 females), aged between 16 to 72 years and with visible or exposed tattoos. According to the protocol, participants were invited to produce two self-portraits, one before and one after they were tattooed, as well as to answer a brief socio-demographic inquiry. They were also asked to provide a written answer on the following topics: (1) "Have you ever felt discriminated against by having tattoos on your body?", (2) "Tattoo Description" and (3) "What does your tattoo mean for you?". We then proceeded to the content analysis of the 774 collected pictorial drawings, using a grid featuring analytical categories, purposely conceived for this study. The analytical grid comprised nine categorical dimensions, defined as "Symbols", "Names", "Animals", "Values/Spirituality", "Traumatic Memories/Loss", "Significant Events", "Identity", "Portrait" and "Family", in order to analyze tattoo designs. The content analysis of the written answers about the meaning of the tattoos was also performed.

Results and Discussion

The results indicate that regarding age, subjects aged 16 to 25 years are the most represented age group amongst the collected sample, representing 42.4% of the total sample. Regarding topic (1) of the questionnaire related to the feelings of discrimination experienced, no discrimination is experienced in most of the respondents, representing 87.3% of the total sample. Individuals who have felt discriminated against name work situations. In addition, family members criticizing and disapproving of tattoos were also mentioned as a source of conflict, as well as depreciative looks given by strangers in public places.

Regarding topic (2) of the questionnaire related to the "Tattoo Description", most tattooed designs referred to the "Symbols" category, representing 43.6% of the analyzed sample. This category included symbolic elements, such as heart, infinite, diamond, star, moon or skull.

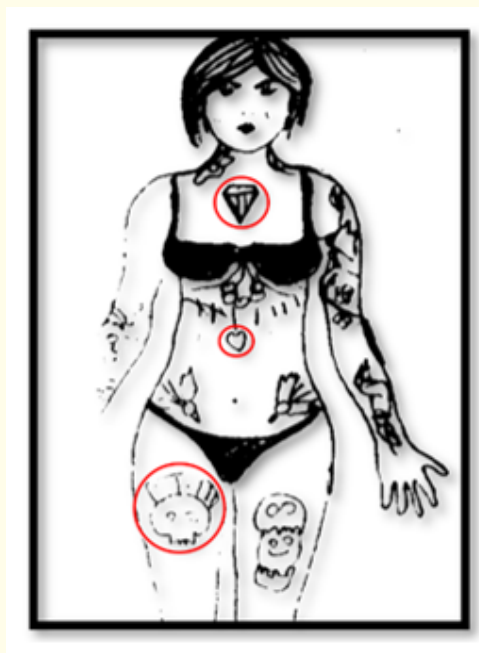


Figure 1: Representation of the "Symbols" tattoo category.

Similarly, many tattooed designs referred to the “Names” category, accounting for 14.6% of the total sample. This category is associated with names or initials of names of significant people or animals. The “Animals” category was also quite represented in tattoos, accounting for 10.7% of the total sample. This category is related to the identification of the tattooed person with the predominant characteristics of the represented animal. As an example, an individual tattooed an owl, associated with wisdom and the will to seek knowledge, and another tattooed a lion, associated with strength to overcome obstacles.

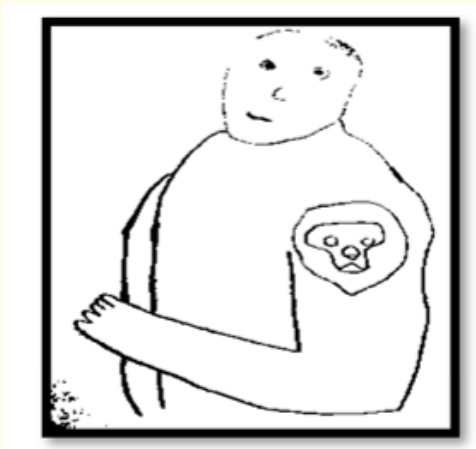


Figure 2: Representation of the “Animals” tattoo category.

The “Values/Spirituality” category represented 23.45% of the total sample. This category is associated with values, beliefs and concepts with mystical and spiritual meaning. Other mentioned categories were “Traumatic Memories/Loss” and “Significant Events” that represent 6.3% and 6% respectively of the total sample. The category “Traumatic Memories/Loss” is related to the experience of negative situations whereas the category “Significant Events” is related to the experience of positive situations.



Figure 3: Representation the of the “Traumatic Memories / Loss” tattoo category (e.g. tattoo with the caption “my father’s death hour”).

Regarding the “Identity” category, which represented 5.9% of the total sample, it was related to the inscription of the name itself or of the characteristics related to the identity of the tattooed individual, such as their zodiac sign, their nickname and the initials of their name.

The least represented category was the “Portrait” category, representing 0.8% of the total sample, which was related to the design of a faithful image of a special person.

Regarding topic (3) of the questionnaire related to the question “What does your tattoo mean for you?”, data shows that the “Family” category had the highest statistical representation, accounting for 25.66% of the total sample. This category is related to tattoos of drawings or sayings/beliefs alluding to relatives, including parents, siblings, grandchildren and children of the tattooed individuals.

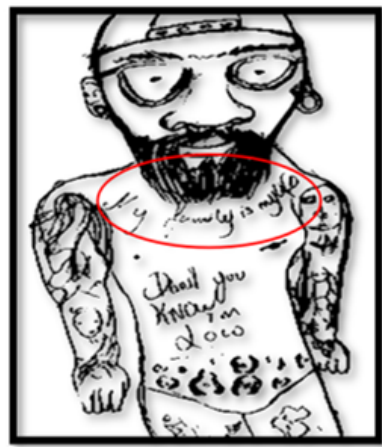
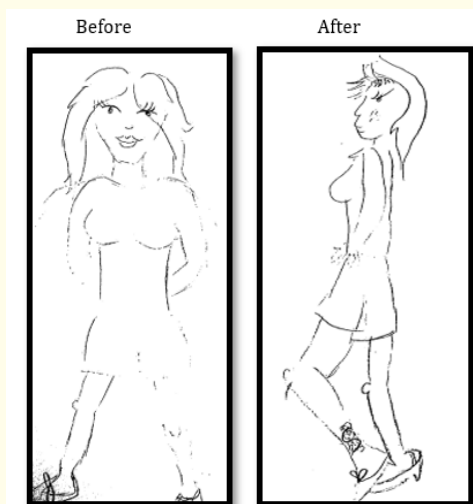


Figure 4: Representation of the “Family” tattoo category.

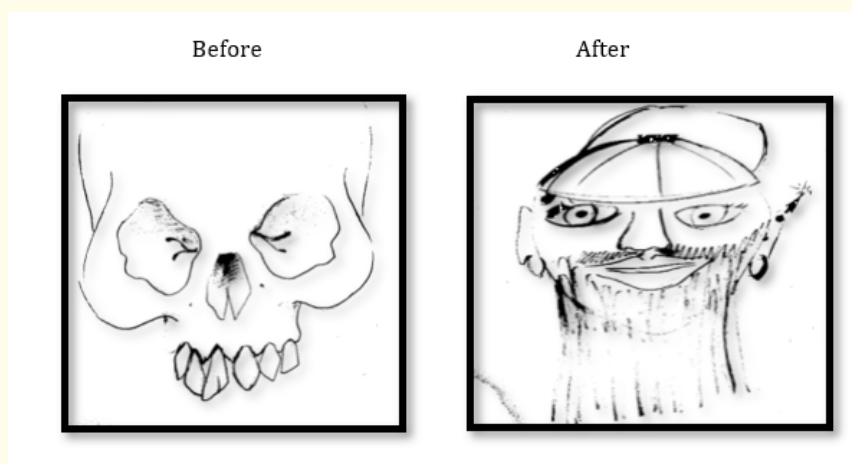
The tattoo is a booster when it comes to building identities, due to the connection between the subject, his identity and his body, in which tattoos are not only a design mark, but also a differentiation and identification marks. It is through the body modification that one gets to build one’s body according to one’s desire. Tattoos as personal mark seem to constitute a stable reference that represents one’s value, as well as the need to stand out and expose oneself.

The tattoo is thus seen as an attempt to control one’s sense of identity and the skin is seen as a place where stories are recorded and the perceptions of one’s own identity is created. Hence, tattoos can be seen as instruments at the disposal of the individual, in relation to his personal needs in the outlook for differentiation and identity.

The results revealed that the self-portraits drawn before the subjects were tattooed showed less body investment than the self-portraits drawn after. However, the mental representation of the self-portraits drawn after the subjects were tattooed showed a fragmented idea of the body - only the body part that was tattooed was pictorially represented. Additionally, they were associated to a state of happiness (e.g. smile, movement, flexibility, freedom) and to a sense of personal valorization. From the content analysis of the drawings, we can subjectively interpret that the body and the Self (seen as unit) seem to be caught in a “fatal trap” [14], in the case of tattooed individuals” instead of “in case of the tattoo individuals. Through tattoos, the body receives a new skin, chosen by its owner, that carries a given inscription [15]. It arises from the connection that the individual establishes between a drawing and a feeling or sensation. As this connection occurs in particular ways, the real meaning of body marks is only understood by those who have it. Reasons for acquiring a body mark



Figures 5 and 6: Representation of tattoos as an identity booster (body posture before and after being tattooed- the latter suggesting differentiation and identity).



Figures 7 and 8: Representation of one's identity being created through tattoos (representation of Self before and after being tattooed).

include the possibility to register feelings, memories and sensations [16], in which the individual transfers to the tattoo a memory. Also, according to some authors, the tattoo is an artistic way of exposing a message in the body [17,18]. The tattoo, besides being a symbol that marks the identity of the subject, is a permanent ornament that helps to affirm the feeling of an identity, a way of writing in the flesh key

moments of existence, in which the body becomes simultaneously a decoration and also a memory [19]. The tattoo is then seen as an attempt to control one's sense of identity and the skin a recording medium.

Conclusion

Currently tattoos serve as anchors to one's self and help narrating an individual's conception of his identity that relates to culture in a coherent way. Results suggest that no discrimination is experienced amongst respondents for having tattoos. Most of the analyzed tattooed designs referred to the "Symbols" category, used as a superstitious metaphor to convey meaning. In addition, the personal meaning of tattoos was mostly related to the "Family" category amongst the sampled individuals.

Tattoos can thus be seen as an instrument at the disposal of the phantasmatic mind, using the skin as a containing medium in the quest for differentiation and identity.

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